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# Leonard Pitts Jr., Columnist and Author, to Share Insights at Bombeck Writers' Conference

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March 7, 2000  
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## NEWS RELEASE

**(EDITOR'S NOTE: Leonard Pitts Jr. will participate in a live on-line chat from 8 to 9 p.m. EST on Thursday, March 23, through Cox Interactive Media. To arrange media interviews, call Teri Rizvi at (937) 229-3241.)**

### LEONARD PITTS JR., COLUMNIST AND AUTHOR, TO SHARE INSIGHTS AT BOMBECK WRITERS' CONFERENCE

DAYTON, Ohio — For syndicated columnist Leonard Pitts Jr., life with father looked nothing like the *Cosby Show* or a Hallmark card commercial.

"Fact is, that man took my childhood. He abused my siblings and me. He abused my mother when I could do little more than watch. He taught me anger and fear at an age when I was too young to handle either," Pitts writes about his father in *Becoming Dad: Black Men and the Journey to Fatherhood*, published in 1999 by Longstreet Press.

Pitts' father was a violent alcoholic who twice held his family at gunpoint. For Pitts, a shy, skinny and bookish kid, the relationship with his father was a childhood journey that went from fear to rage, he says.

Although Pitts' father died in 1975, the son's journey continues. As a father of five and a successful writer with a twice-weekly column in *The Miami Herald* that's syndicated to nearly 100 papers nationwide, Pitts says, "I was ready to come to terms with my own ambivalence about my father and move beyond it." In the style of Studs Terkel, Pitts traveled the country, talking with black men in Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., New York and communities in the Deep South, in corporate offices and around kitchen tables. He talked to "drug dealers and businessmen, counselors and coaches, executives, students, playboys, and a preacher or two — asking fathers about their fathers and sons about their sons." Those conversations form the backbone of his book, which tells the story of black men striving to heal broken places in their lives and to make fathers of themselves.

The next stop on Pitts' journey will take him to the University of Dayton at the end of March to take part in the Erma Bombeck Writers' Workshop and other events surrounding the donation of the Bombeck papers to UD. Registration deadline for the March 31 workshop is

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March 22. For information, call (937) 229-3241.

Pitts will also sit behind his computer and chat with writers, aspiring writers, students and Bombeck fans from 8 to 9 p.m. on Thursday, March 23, through Cox Interactive Media. To join the live chat, visit [www.ActiveDayton.com/entertainment/erma](http://www.ActiveDayton.com/entertainment/erma) and click on online chats. He will also sign copies of his book on campus between 7 and 8 p.m. on Friday, March 31, in Kennedy Union's Torch Lounge and from 1 to 2 p.m. on Saturday, April 1, at Books & Co., 350 E. Stroop Road.

Pitts has received honors from the Society of Professional Journalists, the National Association of Black Journalists and the Simon Wiesenthal Center. He is a 1997 winner of the American Association of Sunday and Features Editors' Writing Awards for commentary, a three-time recipient of the National Headliners Award and was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 1992.

Pitts launched his career early, sending submissions to magazines from the age of 12. By the time he was 18 and a junior at the University of Southern California, he was regularly writing as a freelancer for *Soul*, a black entertainment tabloid. He joined the staff full time after graduation and went on to write for publications such as *Musician*, *Spin*, *Parenting*, *TV Guide*, *Reader's Digest* and *Billboard*.

He made the leap from being a pop music critic to writing about pop culture and social issues when, he says, "I got too old for pop music. I looked up one day and there was hardly anybody singing or rapping that I cared about. They weren't talking to me anymore ... they were talking to my kids. I just couldn't relate. More than that, I had no desire to relate."

So Pitts went to his editors and proposed the idea for the column in which he offers candid opinions on subjects such as culture, race, families, relationships and the politics of the human condition. From Monica Lewinsky to the Confederate flag, from racism to the death penalty, from building a swing set for his daughter to assessing the meaning of Frank Sinatra's legacy, there's no topic Pitts won't touch.

He used to steer clear of abortion, but even that subject sparked a recent column, when pro-life Sen. John McCain was asked what he would do if his daughter came to him seeking his counsel about abortion and responded that it would be a family decision. To Pitts, who acknowledges struggling with his own position on abortion, McCain's comment suggested, "maybe he's a little bit unresolved, too. Maybe there are a lot more folks unresolved."

Pitts has been praised for his even-handed, well-reasoned and open-minded approach to contentious issues. Even when writing about an issue that makes him angry, he frequently generates more light than heat. "Sometimes," he concedes, "heat is more important to generate. It depends on the topic. Nine and half times out 10, I can see the other side, and I have respect for other side. The worst thing you can do in a column is engage in a debate and caricature the

other side," he says.

For example, he said, it doesn't pay to tackle gun control if you're going to paint people who are anti-gun control as "raving gun nuts with gun racks in the back of the truck, and they're all named Bubba and married to their cousins. That's an entertaining caricature, but what you've done ... if you were hoping to persuade or reason with those people, is alienated them, and you've set up a straw man — something that's easy to knock down."

From Pitts' perspective, it's more difficult, but more "rewarding and intellectually honest to take the opposing argument as it exists, give it an honest reading and then point out what you see as the flaws." Beside, he says, the well-reasoned approach "is a lot more fun, as a writer, than to present an opposing argument for which you have absolutely no respect and to get to slash and burn."

While Pitts doesn't employ slash-and-burn tactics often, occasionally he can't resist: "I probably slashed and burned Jerry Falwell over Tinky Winky," the purse-carrying Teletubby toddler that Falwell worried was an agent of the gay agenda. And "when Dennis Rodman kicked a cameraman one time when he fell out of bounds, I read him the riot act. A column like that is a primal scream. Sometimes you just have to yell."

But given his choice between heat and light, "I'd would rather leave (readers) with light in the hope that I can show them something they haven't seen, or conversely, maybe I can learn something from them I haven't seen."

As someone who has been a critic himself, he welcomes and respects criticism from thoughtful readers. "A lot of people's version of criticism is, 'Hey, you jerk, etc., etc.' I can't learn from that," he says.

But he welcomes letters from critics with "something original to say or something that forces me to think." When he was a pop music writer, "I had one reader who took me task for some errors in my terminology in writing about black religious music. She did such a great job of cutting me up, I wasn't offended. I had to admire the cutting. That's the kind of stuff I love. I contacted her and over the years we developed a telephone relationship. I valued her opinion and criticism."

Pitts, who writes candidly about his family — in both his columns and his book — sometimes receives reader comment that comes too close for comfort. When he wrote about his daughter's participation in a martial arts competition in which she won third place, he received a nasty phone message from a regular caller, who said, "She was still a loser." Pitts praises his kids for their "remarkable generosity" in allowing their lives to be a lens through which he

examines the world.

Also generous were the men he interviewed for *Becoming Dad*, which will enter its second printing. "I found out there were a lot of guys out there just like me." And in his efforts to move beyond ambivalence, nearly 25 years after his father's death, Pitts found himself able to write: "Shall I ... spend the rest of my life hating you, berating you, feeling sorry for myself and for you? No. ... I love you because you're my Dad. That's all the reason I have. That's all the reason I need."

The March 29-April 1 Erma Bombeck Conference on Popular American Humor features the presentation of Erma Bombeck's papers to the University of Dayton and includes a writing competition, a dinner and keynote speech featuring Art Buchwald, a writers' workshop, an academic symposium, an "Evening with Erma's Friends" presentation and a series of book signings and on-line chats. For information about any of the events, call (937) 229-3241 or visit [www.ActiveDayton.com/entertainment/erma/](http://www.ActiveDayton.com/entertainment/erma/).

The conference is sponsored by the University of Dayton's National Alumni Association in conjunction with ActiveDayton.com, Books & Co., *Dayton Daily News*, News-Talk 1290 WHIO, Suburban Newspapers of Dayton, Washington-Centerville Public Library, WHIO-TV and WYSO-Radio.